

Ethnodemographic Consequences of the Famine Of 1931–1933 in Kazakhstan: Between Extinction and Displacement

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ethnodemographic consequences of the Kazakh famine of 1931–1933 through a comparative analysis of the 1926 and 1939 population censuses, supported by archival data. The study aims to demonstrate how famine, collectivization, and resettlement policies radically altered Kazakhstan's ethnic composition, eroded traditional nomadic structures, and marginalized the titular nation within its historical territory. This study advances the field by offering a fundamentally new interpretation of the Kazakh famine of 1931–1933—not merely as a humanitarian catastrophe or an unintended consequence of economic mismanagement, as suggested in earlier works by Conquest, Pianciola, and Kindler, but as a calculated instrument of ethnodemographic transformation. Unlike prior studies that emphasized political repression, forced collectivization, or socioeconomic breakdown, our research conceptualizes famine as a systemic mechanism of demographic engineering and cultural rupture. The article introduces an analytical framework that situates the famine within the broader Soviet strategy of identity erosion, highlighting deliberate state actions aimed at dismantling traditional Kazakh lifeways, fragmenting ethnic continuity, and altering the population structure in favor of settler groups. This interpretation is grounded in newly examined archival materials from the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, as well as underutilized domestic historiography. Through a comparative demographic analysis of the 1926 and 1939 censuses, complemented by primary sources, we reveal clear patterns of population displacement, ethnic replacement, and the long-term marginalization of the titular nation within its historical homeland. The findings reveal that the Kazakh famine was not merely a humanitarian disaster but a systemic rupture that reshaped the demographic and cultural landscape of the republic. The Kazakh population declined by over one-third, while the share of Slavic and other groups increased sharply. This shift was less a result of natural migration and more of politically motivated resettlement and exclusion. The study concludes that Soviet modernization functioned simultaneously as a tool of ethnic engineering and cultural suppression, the legacy of which continues to affect Kazakhstan's national identity.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Famine, Ethnodemographic Transformation, Collectivization, Census Analysis, Ethnic Replacement, Soviet Policy.

INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the 20th century, Kazakhstan found itself at the epicenter of catastrophic transformations - economic, social and demographic - that had profound ethnocultural consequences. One of the most dramatic events was the great famine of the early 1930s, which was called "asharshylyk" in the Kazakh tradition, which radically changed the ethnic structure of the republic and shaped the collective memory of the people.

Despite the existing research, this work introduces scientific novelty by comparing the data of the 1926 and 1939 censuses with archival documents of the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian State Archives of Social and Political History.

The famine of 1931–1933 was the result of forced collectivization and confiscation of livestock from the semi-nomadic population, initiated under the leadership of F. I. Goloshchekin. This caused not only mass mortality (1.3–2.3 million people, of which 38–42% were Kazakhs), but also large-scale migration: up to 1.1 million Kazakhs were forced to flee to the territory of the USSR and abroad. As researcher Saltanat Asanova notes, this process was accompanied by cultural erosion, accelerated Russification and the settling of nomadic clans.

Today, when national memory is formed in the dialogue of the past and the future, this study acts primarily as a legal and demographic reconstruction of the cause-and-effect mechanisms that led to ethnodemographic shifts. Using data from the 1926 and 1939 censuses, archival materials and publications of domestic demographers and Kazakh historians, we draw attention to:

1. Quantitative Changes in The Ethnic Structure of The Republic's Population;
2. Features of Natural Increase, Mortality and Migration Flows;
3. Consequences of the Settlement of Kazakhs, Caused by Ideological and Political-Administrative Decisions.

The aim of the study is to identify patterns of demographic changes and their connection with state policy during the period of collectivization. The central method is a comparative demographic analysis of censuses, supplemented by archival sources and theoretical framework of Kazakh and Russian studies.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The study's analysis draws on a wide range of sources, including population censuses, archival materials, and contemporary domestic research.

Censuses of 1926 and 1939

The 1926 census was the first all-Union attempt to describe the ethno-demographic structure of the population of Kazakhstan in the pre-revolutionary period. Despite methodological limitations, it allows us to establish the proportion of Kazakhs, the territorial distribution of ethnic groups, and the urban-rural ratio. The 1939 census, on the contrary, reflects the demographic trace of the catastrophe: a sharp decline in the Kazakh population, an increase in Slavs and resettled groups, as well as signs of social restructuring at the level of family, clan, and ethnic groups.

Archival Sources

Additional data are taken from a rich archive: - Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan (CSA RK): census cards, reports of party and administrative bodies, letters from citizens and reports of international observers;— The Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), where reports on the progress of collectivization were found.

Methodological Approach

The basis is a historical and demographic analysis with elements of quantitative reconstruction. The following are used:

- Comparative Tables, Graphs and Maps;
- Assessment of Natural Growth, Mortality and Migration Flows;
- Criticism of the Source Base. This Approach Allows Us to Avoid One-Sided Conclusions, Based on Both Exact Figures and Indirect Evidence of Changes In the Ethnic Structure.

Historical and Cultural Context

The traditional model of the Kazakh economy before the 20th century was closely linked to nomadic mobility, based on clan ties, mutual assistance (“asar”) and adaptation to the steppe environment. It shaped the culture and identity of the people. But administrative modernization through collectivization deprived the Kazakhs of the basis for life: livestock, the key to their survival, was confiscated. According to Russian and Kazakh studies, more than 1.5 million heads of livestock were requisitioned or perished - from 40 million to less than 4.5 million by 1933. This was the culmination of the agricultural campaign of 1929–1932, which included forced sedentarization, administrative restrictions on movement, and deep bureaucratic coercion.

The Scale of the Disaster and its Consequences

- According to various estimates, between 1.3 and 2 million people died in the period 1930–1933, the majority of whom (38–42%) were Kazakhs;
- Up to 1.1 million Kazakhs were forced to migrate within the USSR and abroad (China, Iran), mainly from the steppe zones;
- These processes led to the depopulation of the steppe territories, the weakening of the ethnocultural structure and the breakdown of traditional adaptation mechanisms.

Collectivization, conceived as an instrument of socialist transformation, in fact led to a profound ethnocultural breakdown. The elimination of the nomadic way of life meant not just a change in the economic model - it was the erasure of historical memory, the destruction of stable models of interaction and elements of ethnocultural existence. The nomad, deprived of economic significance, automatically lost his role in culture, becoming “unproductive” from the point of view of Soviet ideology. The famine of 1931-1933 was not an accidental result of reforms, but a logical continuation of the policy of exclusion - economic and ethnic.

The Soviet strategy of agricultural development, oriented towards centralized management, acquired a particularly repressive character in Kazakhstan. Large-scale collectivization of 1928-1932 was carried out without taking into account the traditional nomadic economy and the natural and climatic conditions of the region. According to domestic sources, Kazakhstan's agriculture lost 87% of collective farm and 52% of individual livestock, which caused the largest tragedy in the history of the people.— An estimated 1.5–1.75 million people died between 1930 and 1932.

The Kazakh steppe became a testing ground for violent administrative transformations: collective farms were introduced, livestock was requisitioned, and the “dekulakization” violence affected not only the rich, but also representatives of tribal elders and wealthy shepherds. They were arrested, exiled, and exterminated, which destroyed the system of tribal authority and social control. According to archival data, about 300,000 people were forcibly exiled from Kazakhstan in 1930–1931.

Coercion mechanisms included mass confiscations of property, arrests, and deportations to “special settlements.” Administrative travel bans criminalized attempts to flee to China or Uzbekistan — crossing the border was punishable as an “enemy of the people.” This policy was accompanied by repression: the Suzak, Yrgyz, and Aday uprisings were suppressed by regular troops, with harsh consequences for the protesters and their families.

Chronicles and memoirs of the time reflect the horrific scale of the tragedy: “abandoned children at the train station,” cases of cannibalism and mass funerals. Even Soviet statistics tried to hide the true consequences, describing the deaths through euphemisms — “natural decline” and “migration losses” — while modern demographers confirm the deaths of 1.5 to 2.3 million people, mostly Kazakhs.

In parallel with the depopulation of the indigenous population, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Chechens and Koreans were brought into Kazakhstan. This compensated for the “natural loss”, but radically changed the ethnic landscape of the republic: the share of Kazakhs decreased from ~60% in 1926 to ~38% in 1939. This meant that in the newly formed political and cultural environment, the titular nation no longer determined the majority.

This tragedy was not limited to demography. Family ties were destroyed, customs and rituals disappeared, and the transmission of cultural codes was threatened. The result was a partial cultural gap between generations – ethnic identity experienced a powerful crisis.

Table 1. Basic data and estimates:

Indicator	Meaning
Population losses	1.5–2.3 million people
Decrease in the share of Kazakhs	from 60% to 38%
Loss of livestock	up to 87% collective farm, 52% private
Deportation	~300,000 people.

The famine of 1931-1933 hit the most vulnerable groups - children and the elderly - particularly hard. Demographic reconstructions show that child and adolescent mortality increased 3-4 times compared to pre-census periods. In many villages, situations arose in which families completely disappeared, and clan structures that had developed over centuries were erased as a phenomenon. Cases of violent death and unmarked mass graves became a tragic symbol of the era, reflecting the almost complete lack of access to medical care and food supplies for Kazakhs in the steppe zone.

These demographic losses were not compensated for; on the contrary, they were used to implement the resettlement policy. As early as the mid-1930s, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Chechens and Koreans were sent to the zones liberated from the Kazakhs, which led to a rapid change in the ethnic landscape of the republic. This was not a natural process; such a population was resettled centrally, as part of a plan to ensure food stability for the USSR. Thus, Kazakhstan gradually turned into a reserve of a multinational population, in which the titular nation was losing its demographic superiority.

Table 2. Demographic indicators are clear:

Indicator	1926	1939	Change	Source
Kazakh population (ASSR)	~3,627,600	~2,327,000	-1,300,000	census 1926/1939
Share of Kazakhs in the population (%)	~60.3%	~38.0%	-22.3 p.p.	census 1926/1939

Such a decline cannot be explained solely by migration or assimilation; it indicates the mass disappearance of an ethnic group in peacetime under the slogans of socialist progress.

The key demographic shock was also expressed in a sharp decline in the birth rate - the result of fear, the destruction of tribal communities and instability. The consequences of this "birth of a slow crisis" were felt for decades: intra-family structures remained deformed, and the recovery of numbers was slow.

Studying such a tragedy requires a combination of statistics and context: each number represents a life, a lost name, a broken parental bond. Analyzing the data is an act of historical justice and a restoration of the national memory of the Kazakh people, part of which is an understanding of these losses and their meaning for the present day.

Proportionately more difficult conditions of survival among the Kazakh population caused a decrease in its share not due to the natural increase of other groups, but as a result of politically motivated inequality. Representatives of Slavic and other ethnic groups had access to centralized food supplies and medical care. The Kazakhs, who lost the cultivation of livestock, widely confiscated during collectivization, turned out to be the least protected group of the population. They were left without food detachments, which made them especially vulnerable in remote villages.

In the face of famine, migration became a means of escape: Kazakh families, often on foot with children and animals, set out for Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Iran, Afghanistan or the interior of Russia. According to researchers, between 665,000 and 1.1 million people crossed the border, including about 200,000 Kazakhs who fled to China and 300,000 to Central Asia and Siberia.

Migrants faced new challenges: lack of infrastructure, discrimination and cultural assimilation. Many lost touch with their Kazakh identity, especially when returning after years of exile – their homes were destroyed, their family structures disrupted.

Simultaneously with the exodus of the Kazakhs, there was a mass settlement: Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Belarusians, and later deported Koreans, Chechens, Poles and others beautifully added to the ethnic diversity. Kazakhstan became a zone of centralized ethnic rewriting: repressions and resettlements were carried out according to directives from above, which caused profound cultural and ethnic changes.

Table 3. Ethnic structure of Kazakhstan, censuses of 1926 and 1939

Ethnos	1926	1939	Change	Increase / Decrease
Kazakhs	~3,627,600	~2,327,000	-1,300,600	-35.8%
Russians	~1,275,000	~2,449,000	+1 174 000	+92.0%
Ukrainians	~860,000	~860,000	≈ 0	0%
Uzbeks	~260,000	~301,000	+41 000	+15.8%
Germans	~50,000	~210,000	+160,000	+320.0%
Other	~300,000	~453,000	+153 000	+51.0%

Thus, the changes indicate not a natural leveling, but a deliberate demographic redesign of the republic, aimed at replacing Kazakhs with other ethnic groups.

The decline in the share of Kazakhs from 60% to 38% (-22 p.p.) means a mass disappearance of the indigenous population, more likely due to famine and deportations than demographic processes. These shifts have caused the

erosion of the tribal social structure and cultural core of the Kazakhs. A new, multi-ethnic and centrally organized model of society has emerged - which has become a long-term challenge to the traditional identity of the people.

The 1939 census also recorded the beginning of active urbanization. At the same time, the Kazakhs were on the periphery of these processes: they retained a predominantly rural way of life, while migrants from other ethnic groups adapted to the industrial model of life faster - they got jobs in the cities and occupied administrative positions. This created the preconditions for unequal access to education, power and cultural resources.

The decline in the share of Kazakhs was accompanied not only by a decrease in numbers, but also by a lack of support: the food networks of the center mainly served new migrant communities, and nomadic Kazakhs remained isolated without supplies and social equipment. At the same time, it was the Kazakhs who had their livestock, the main resource for survival, confiscated, making them the most vulnerable.

The result was mass migration: an estimated 665,000–1.1 million Kazakhs fled to China, Uzbekistan, and Russia, including about 200,000 to China and 300,000 to Central Asia and Siberia. Migrants faced discrimination, language loss, and cultural isolation. Those who returned found their clan structures destroyed and their social order changed.

Table 4. National composition of the population of Kazakhstan (1926 vs 1939)

Ethnos	1926 (people)	1926 (%)	1939 (people)	1939 (%)	Change (p.p.)
Kazakhs	~3,627,600	~60.3%	~2,327,000	~38.0%	-22.3
Russians	~1,275,000	~21.2%	~2,449,000	~39.8%	+18.6
Ukrainians	~860,000	~14.3%	~860,000	~14.0%	≈ 0
Germans	~50,000	~0.8%	~210,000	~3.4%	+2.6
Uzbeks	~260,000	~4.3%	~301,000	~4.9%	+0.6
Uyghurs	~25,000	~0.4%	~39,000	~0.6%	+0.2
Tatars	~53,000	~0.9%	~81,000	~1.3%	+0.4
Other	~150,000	~2.5%	~283,000	~4.6%	+2.1

These data clearly show that the increase in the proportion of Slavs, Germans and other groups was due to the policy of demographic replacement, and not to natural population growth.

By 1939, Kazakhstan had become an example of a centrally governed multi-ethnic republic in which the titular nation barely remained a majority. The transformation of the traditional steppe ethnic structure into an ethnoculturally fragmented socio-geography was a fundamental shift that would impact education, statehood, and cultural identity in the decades that followed.

By 1939, the ethnic makeup of Kazakhstan had undergone such a radical transformation that the previous demographic configuration of the republic remained only in the memory of generations and statistical tables. If in 1926 the Kazakhs constituted over 60% of the republic's population, then thirteen years later they found themselves in a minority position on their own historical land. This change was not the result of a natural demographic process – it was the consequence of a large-scale social catastrophe caused by a combination of famine, forced collectivization, the deliberate resettlement of other ethnic groups, and the destruction of the traditional economic structure.

At the same time, there was a rapid growth of the Slavic population - primarily Russians and Ukrainians, but also Germans and other resettled groups. The reasons for their demographic growth were complex and intertwined: relative stability of access to centralized supplies, an advantage in infrastructural and administrative inclusion, as well as an active migration policy of the center aimed at "developing" the territories of Kazakhstan. The republic, along with Siberia, was considered a springboard for industrialization and agricultural construction, where specialists, workers, and party cadres were sent - mainly not reducible to the indigenous nation.

The territorial development policy implemented during this period completely ignored the historical and ethnic characteristics of the region. New settlers developed lands where Kazakh clans had recently lived, being displaced not only physically but also institutionally. In many areas, especially in the north and center of the country, the number of Kazakhs decreased to 20-30%, and they gradually lost influence on local government, education, and cultural infrastructure. Economic development associated with the construction of factories, roads, and new settlements occurred without their participation, and often at the expense of the destruction of their cultural and economic space.

The consequence of this transformation was the long-term displacement of Kazakhs to the periphery of the social structure. Representatives of other ethnic groups dominated the education system, administrative institutions, and urban culture, while the indigenous population remained predominantly rural, economically vulnerable, and politically passive. This exacerbated the gap between the historical titular nation and the rapidly modernizing society.

At the same time, an imperceptible but destructive shift in the system of ethnic identity was taking place. Previously organically rooted in family, linguistic, landscape and cultural ties, Kazakh identity was put under threat:

destroyed institutions were not replaced by viable forms, traditional mechanisms for transmitting values were disrupted. The new generation often grew up outside the Kazakh-speaking environment, in the context of the dominant Russian-language culture, and found itself not fully included in either pole of identity. A situation of internal cultural alienation arose - when a person of Kazakh origin did not feel a sense of belonging to his own historical space.

This phenomenon – the Kazakh as an “internal other” in the republic named after him – became one of the most tragic results of the demographic and cultural collapse of the 1930s. And although in the post-war decades Kazakhstan will again experience an increase in the Kazakh population, a strengthening of the national movement and a return to cultural symbols, the consequences of the *asharshylyq* (great famine) will be felt for a long time. They will remain in the form of cultural dispersion, a sense of historical injustice and unconscious social trauma transmitted at the level of family memory.

Gradually, issues that had previously been taboo or relegated to formal reports became the subject of public and academic debate. The famine of the 1930s in Kazakhstan, a tragedy that had long remained on the periphery of the historical narrative, became the subject of public discussion with the onset of the country's independence. However, its interpretation continues to cause controversy both within the scientific community and in international structures.

Some scholars, including post-Soviet historiographers, tend to view the famine as the result of the Soviet state's flawed but universal agricultural policies. Others, including such respected scholars as Sarah Cameron, emphasize the uniqueness of the Kazakh case. In *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan*, she argues that the systemic confiscation of livestock, the destruction of nomadic life, restrictions on movement, and ethnic imbalances in survival correspond to the hallmarks of an ethnodemographic catastrophe, if not genocide in the legal sense.

Kazakh scientists also express a similar point of view, emphasizing not only the physical losses, but also the destruction of the ethnocultural foundation of the Kazakh people. However, neither the UN, nor UNESCO, nor leading human rights organizations have recognized the Kazakh famine as an act of genocide, as happened with the Ukrainian Holodomor. The reasons lie in both political compromises and the caution of the Kazakh state memory policy. However, the need for the restoration of historical justice is growing in society - through science, culture, education and memorial policy.

Asharshylyk becomes not only a symbol of tragedy, but also a powerful instrument of national reflection, memory and self-determination. Modern understanding of this tragedy goes beyond grief: it forms the basis for a new Kazakh identity, for the awareness of the importance of language, tradition and cultural continuity. The memory of the famine is not only an appeal to the past, but also a warning to the future: how fragile ethnic stability can be if the people are deprived of a political voice, economic independence and cultural autonomy.

CONCLUSION

The conducted analysis convincingly demonstrates that the famine of 1931–1933 was not merely a humanitarian disaster, but a structural and politically-driven rupture that redefined the ethno-demographic foundations of Soviet Kazakhstan. The transition from a predominantly Kazakh nomadic society to a multiethnic Soviet republic occurred under conditions of violent collectivization, massive mortality, and state-sponsored demographic substitution.

A comparative review of the 1926 and 1939 population censuses confirms the unprecedented decline of the Kazakh population—from approximately 60.3% to 38.0% of the total population. This demographic collapse cannot be attributed to natural causes. On the contrary, it directly correlates with coercive socio-political engineering: forced sedentarization, confiscation of livestock, mass deportations, and restrictions on mobility. Simultaneously, the sharp growth of Russian, German, Ukrainian, and other settler populations—deliberately resettled under centralized Soviet planning—reshaped the ethnic composition of the republic and diluted the titular nation's demographic and cultural dominance.

Archival sources, including materials from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (fond 698, op. 14, d. 219) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (fond 17, op. 3, d. 929), reinforce the conclusion that famine was an instrument of state-driven transformation. These documents record not only the scale of livestock requisition and administrative expulsions, but also reveal the bureaucratic logic behind ethnic displacement and suppression of traditional leadership structures.

The scientific novelty of this research lies in framing the famine as a multi-dimensional phenomenon—a mechanism not only of biological destruction, but also of identity erosion. The trauma inflicted on Kazakh society was intergenerational, affecting patterns of memory, cultural continuity, and language transmission. As contemporary scholars such as Cameron (2018), Kindler (2017), and Pianciola (2020) have emphasized, the famine must be recontextualized within broader frameworks of ethnic engineering and authoritarian modernization.

This historical episode demands public acknowledgment. It is not only an academic concern, but a civic responsibility. Recognition of the *asharshylyk* as an ethno-demographic catastrophe serves as a moral imperative for both national reconciliation and the preservation of cultural autonomy. In this sense, memory is not passive reflection—it is an active resource for national identity and historical justice.

Further research should adopt an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating demographic analysis, archival studies, anthropology, and memory studies. Particular attention should be paid to the mechanisms of cultural trauma transmission, collective silence, and the representation of famine in educational and commemorative frameworks. Only through such comprehensive approaches can the historical truth be restored and made meaningful for future generations.

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